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ABSTRACT

Demographic changes, especially changes in the birth cohort, will have a major impact on college enrollments. The passing of the Baby Boom generation may cause the closure of many colleges in the 1980's. The post-Baby Boom decline in births was almost completely a Caucasian phenomenon; the percentage of minorities is increasing dramatically, especially in the Sun Belt. The number of high school graduates from the Sun Belt will increase in less than a decade (in contrast to about 15 years for the population as a whole) with a high percentage of minorities. Thus, it behooves the higher education community to do everything it can to make sure that minority students become college eligible. Additional factors affecting enrollments will be the number of youths moving from high school directly into jobs, the availability of postsecondary education other than colleges and universities, the educational problems of students from single-parent families, the lack of funds for student aid in the Sun Belt, and the educational needs of the over-65 age group. (DC)

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by Harold L. Hodgkinson

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GUESS WHO'S COMING TO COLLEGE: YOUR STUDENTS IN 1990

Every society is constructed on a foundation of demographic assumptions. When these assumptions shift, the result is a major shock felt throughout the foundation and throughout the society in total. However, because demographic changes, especially changes in the size and nature of the birth cohort, take many years to run their course through the age spectrum, it is possible to have early warning systems built up to help us minimize the effects of demographic shocks.

The Baby Boom and Aftermath During the years of 1946 to 1964, birth rates in all parts of the United States turned upward at a very high rate. After 1964, birth rates fell almost as fast as they had risen. By 1979-1980, births were beginning to move upward again, but not in the same even manner everywhere in the country.

In 1982, we were looking not at an increase or decrease alone, but at a wave. At the crest of the wave is the Baby Boom generation, now in its forties. During the 1980's, the 35 to 44 age group increases in size by 42 percent. After the wave crest comes a trough of population decline reaching from those in the early twenties down to about age 5. At the back of the trough, a new crest is beginning to form composed of the Baby Boom's children. This "echo" of the original Baby Boom cohort is much smaller due to the large number of women who have either had no children, who have cut down on family size, or who have a larger number of career options today, etc.

The Baby Boom has sequentially put exorbitant demands on every age level it moves through, like a mouse in a snake. The expansion came first with hospital maternity wards, then expansion of Levittown-like suburbs, then elementary schools, then high schools, then colleges, then entry-level jobs in the work-force, etc. As the mouse moved on by, demand for services at each age level declined rapidly, starting with maternity wards, then a rash of elementary school closings, then secondary schools, and perhaps colleges in the 1980s. At the other end of the snake, a much smaller mouse can now be seen--in many places, kindergarten and elementary schools are facing major teacher shortages, new schools are needed, and youth-oriented consumption patterns are on the increase. In about 1998, this cohort will become the first group of high school graduates of increased size since the Baby Boom.

A key problem in predicting college enrollments has to do with the fact that population changes are not carried evenly by all parts of our population. The major decline in births after the Baby Boom was almost completely a Caucasian (and probably middle class) phenomenon. Birth rates for minorities stayed even during those years, resulting in an increased percentage of birth coming from minorities, while white and middle-class births were a smaller percentage of the birth cohort. Today, the number of Native Americans, Hispanics, Orientals, Mormons, and Seventh Day Adventists are all increasing rapidly, because of either ethnic or religious values regarding family size, use of birth control, divorce, etc. By 1990, minorities of all ages will constitute 20 to 25 percent of our total population, while their percentage among youth cohorts will be over 30 percent (it is 26 percent today). In some states, particularly Texas and California, minorities will be over 45 percent of the state birth cohort. It is difficult to deliberately avoid the educational needs of 45 percent of a state's youth.

Differential Fertility is also a regional issue in the U.S. Both total births and birth rates (per thousand eligible females) are up in the Sun Belt and holding even or still declining in most of the Frost Belt. Thus, for the first time, we are faced with a "two nation" perspective on educational policy--trying to get more educational facilities

and services for youth in the Sun Belt, and cutting back on these services in the Frost Belt. In less than a decade, the number of high school graduates will increase in most Sun Belt states. Some, like Texas, are increasing already due to immigration. The percentage of minorities among these graduates will be very high.

Thus, out of sheer self-interest, it would behoove the higher education community to do everything to make sure that the largest possible number of minority students do well in public school, and thus become college eligible. If significant numbers of minority students leave the public schools before graduation or graduate without the aspiration for college, *the potential decline in the college cohort would not be 24 percent for the nation in 1990, but could be twice that.* Recent reports of increasing attrition of minority students from schools add credence to this possibility.

Additional factors are at work. With fewer youth in some regions, many able youth may be able to move directly from high school to a good paying job, either bypassing college entirely or deferring college for a few years. Over 20 percent of new college enrollees have not come directly from high school--"stopping out" seems to be acceptable and even desirable. In the past, women have been underrepresented in college enrollments. Now, 52 percent of undergraduates are female.

Today, about 12 million people attend colleges and universities in the U.S. However, another 46 million adults are being educated by another service provider. If one quarter of these 46 million adults now being educated had decided to take their education programs at a college or university, there would be no decline in enrollments in higher education. However, the pressure for further education has basically gone around colleges and universities; we have now built a "second system" of post-secondary education in the U.S. whose total investment per year is about what is invested in colleges and universities put together--about $50 billion.

In 1950, the typical American family unit consisted of a working father, a housewife mother, and two or more school-age children. That pattern, which fit over 65 percent of the households in America in 1950, fits about 17 percent today. The number of children reared in single-parent families has risen in spectacular fashion in the last decade. This is particularly important because new research has established that children from single-parent families have a great deal of difficulty learning in schools--they are far more often discipline problems than are children with two parents living at home, and their level of school achievement is considerably lower than two-parent children. Thus, there is good reason to believe that a large segment of the current early elementary school class of the 1980's will be unable or unwilling to consider college when they are 18.

Although the Sun Belt still has a strong appeal as a place to move to, there are underlying signs of pathology in those areas which will alter the dynamics of higher education considerably. There is a new kind of poverty in the Sun Belt. Houston has chosen to mortgage its future by not plowing current revenues back into the city in the form of improved infrastructures--better freeways, mass transportation, social services, etc. It may be that in many of the most rapidly expanding Sun Belt cities, there will have to be generated massive new sources of revenue for student aid.

In addition to the major expansion of the 35 to 44 year old group at present, we are also encountering a rapid growth of the number of those over 65, of whom there will be 30 million by 1990. Though they do not seek access to work or skills to increase their productivity, their educational needs are very real and important. Their numbers will be formidable in a political sense, and they vote in large numbers. Education may well become one of the major issues on their agenda.

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